The importance of team morale

Priya Sharma¹
considers
dental
team

morale during the
COVID-19 pandemic.

New year ... new beginnings.

The dawn of 2021 brings with it a certain amount of hope and aspiration. Globally, after many months, the human race has a deep desire to return to normal. Of course, when we say 'normal' we are referring to life as we knew it before the pandemic. 2020 has been a challenging year both on a personal and professional level. The dental profession has been greatly impacted by the pandemic and the way we practise has changed, perhaps forever. Along with these changes has come associated stresses.

Dental professionals have seamlessly incorporated the required changes and have adapted to a new way of working. We have implemented guidance surrounding infection control, PPE, fallow times, social distancing, and more. All of this has had a profound impact on dentistry.

Perhaps now more than ever it is paramount to ensure to build and maintain team morale. Maintaining this in a dental environment is challenging at the best of times not withstanding an epidemic. However, the wellbeing of the team is paramount to any dental practice. This article will address ways we can boost team morale seamlessly and practically in the dental practice.

The Lead

The practice should have a pandemic Lead. This person does not need to have specialist knowledge but is a central point of contact at the practice. In most circumstances this is the practice manager. The Lead should set the tone for a positive work environment. Motivations should be provided to members of staff and any concerns reasonably addressed. The Lead should be available, approachable and supportive.

Communicate

It is important to create a transparent environment where open communication is encouraged. Ensure all members of the team are aware of the practice's policies, protocols, standard operation procedures in light of COVID-19.

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Regulation and guidance have been rapidly evolving as we learn more about coronavirus each day. The Lead should share all developments and how these will be incorporated at the practice.

Ask all members to share their views and concerns. Honest feedback can help create a better work environment and allow for improvement where there are gaps. One should not be dismissive but seriously consider all team members' responses. Be proactive and directly ask individuals how they feel about the pandemic and how the practice is dealing with our 'new normal'. A suggestion would be to incorporate this into staff meetings and/or one on one discussions. Effective communication perhaps has never been more important. Just the thought that all team members are being actively listened to and that their thoughts are valued can increase team morale.

Acknowledge

The first step to boost dental team morale is by simply acknowledging the stress and the new environment in which we find ourselves. Acknowledge the pandemic and do not pretend it does not exist. Focus on the things you can control. It may be that coronavirus may reveal better and safer ways to do things at the practice.

Do not ignore the obvious but openly discuss the current situation and all the related implications. All members of staff will have varying levels of concern and uncertainty. Each person is different in how they react to the environment around them and as such each person should be uniquely addressed. We should all do this and be supportive of each other.

Transparency

The pandemic has introduced many unknowns both in our personal and professional lives. A transparent work environment will instil confidence in all members of the dental team. For example, if there is confusion about government guidance then clarification should be sought. Providing a clear roadmap for the practice provides everyone with direction and the same foundation. Advise that as the effect of the pandemic changes on society, so will the practice plan.

Protect the team

Ensure all current guidance regarding infection control and PPE is being adhered to. The safety of the team is of paramount importance. All isolation government regulations should be rigorously followed.

Daily screening of all staff members should be carried out. At the first onset of symptoms that individual must isolate. Team cohesion during the epidemic is paramount.

Physical and mental stress

Needless to say, there has been an enormous burden placed on all individuals during the past year. The dental environment is posing new physical and mental stress on the team. This must be acknowledged and dealt with in a confidential and proactive manner. The threat of COVID-19 is ever present in all realms of our life but especially in dentistry. When most people are being advised to 'work from home if they can', this is clearly not an option for dental professionals. This on its own creates stress.

Pandemic fatigue is a very real thing. If you are concerned with a particular member of staff then confidentially allow for an open discussion. All team members should have a bespoke risk assessment in light of the pandemic. A one-size-fits-all approach should be avoided. Advise all members of suitable mental health resources and how to access these. You may need to involve other medical professionals and occupational health.

Wellbeing and self-care

Encourage everyone to maintain an exercise routine, a well-balanced diet and look after their general wellbeing. The new requirements of extensive PPE can prove to be challenging and perhaps a quick walk in the middle of the day over lunch can help. As staggered lunches and breaks are advised, this may be an opportunity for a few members to step outside.

Financial burden

Various financial burdens may exist, for example, someone's partner may have lost their job or be facing other job insecurities. Self-employed staff may not have qualified for furlough. Be mindful that everyone may have various parental/caregiving responsibilities which may require flexible working arrangements. Unpaid time off may need to be taken for parental/caregiving responsibilities. Children are being sent home from school because their school bubble needs to isolate. Therefore, many different scenarios exist which unfortunately relate to a negative financial impact. If staff are concerned then practically help create a solution. For example, explore any opportunities for certain staff to work from home and so forth.

Education

Consider tailored continuing professional

development even if this is provided virtually/remotely; it will help instil confidence in providing COVID-19 secure dentistry. This could be tailored to various staff or for all members of the practice. Asking members what type of education they will benefit from and arranging this may prove to be fruitful.

Team building

All members of the practice have unique roles but should share a sense of identity and purpose. This common vision is what ties all members together. All dental practices strive to provide safe and optimal dental care. Ensure all members are aware of the practice's COVID-19 standard operating procedures. Create a culture where a solid team develops. Hierarchies and boundaries should not exist. Encouraging social interaction is important but quite difficult with social distancing where we cannot share meals or a coffee. Be creative and discover new platforms to team build such as virtual and online events.

Charitable work

The practice may choose to carry out charitable work or volunteering as a way to give back and create solidarity at the practice. Consider organising the team to take on a community project which will have a positive impact. A quick search on the internet will reveal many companies who provide this service.

Unrelenting reign

The majority of 2020 was taken over ferociously by COVID-19. It impacted both our personal and professional lives in a surreal manner. Last year was highlighted by fear and uncertainty of the unknown. The year drew to a close with a ray of hope as there was the coronavirus vaccine being administered to priority groups. The coronavirus vaccine provides genetic code to cause the body to build immunity against COVID-19. The discovery, breakneck speed research and approval of the vaccine proved to the world that in the face of adversity the human potential is infinite. It is with this hope we enter the New Year.

The next normal

Coronavirus is here to stay but 2021 brings with it the hope of vaccination and immunity. We are now in a position to face the pandemic. This positivity should be relayed to members of the dental practice.

We can enter the New Year with a renewed hope. Stay well and safe.

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